Eyes Wide Open: Committing the Affective Fallacy


Jane F. Thrailkill’s Affecting Fictions not only dares to commit the affective fallacy; she insists on the intellectual necessity of doing so given the consistency with which texts of American literary realism collapse any clear-cut distinctions between the mind and the body. The “mindful corporeality of affective experience” (7) and “the interanimation of the human mind and body” (8) in works ranging from Oliver Wendell Holmes’s Elsie Venner to Kate Chopin’s The Awakening to Henry James’s The Wings of the Dove demand a theoretical position, which is also deeply historicist, that recognizes the key role played by emotions in navigating the complicated circuitry of the mind and body. “What happens when we feel our way into works of fiction?” (8) is the problematic that organizes Thrailkill’s account. Indeed, one the most satisfying aspects of this analysis—at least to this historically trained reader—is that it is also the question posed and probed in the novels themselves, as well as in the vast historical archive ranging across Williams James (Affecting Fiction’s putative hero), John Dewey, and Arthur Schopenhauer, to name just a few, that Thrailkill brings to bear in her readings.

Thrailkill’s contribution to our understanding of American literary realism is significant for many reasons. First, she does a brilliant job of demonstrating the absolute link between her theoretical defense of the affective fallacy and the philosophical tradition of radical empiricism that underwrites that defense. In addition, she has current developments in neuroscience and the philosophy of mind on her side. The writings of Antonio Damasio and Daniel Dennett, for example, are ably enlisted in order to interpret texts in relation to a “neurologically networked human body with its astonishing capacities for thought and appreciation” (21). Second, she develops a new model for reading realist texts, one that consistently establishes these texts in relation to the language of aesthetics and, in doing so, marshals a powerful argument against a critical approach that “associates [literary realism] with cultural work rather than aesthetics, with objectivity rather than subjectivity, and with the rational mind instead of the feeling body” (21). It is not that Thrailkill is against the idea of literature doing cultural work, but as is the case with a new wave of literary criticism that focuses on aesthetics, her analysis does not begin with the assumption that “cultural work,” Jane Tompkins’s key term for the interventions made by sentimentalism in the antebellum period, is historicist and aesthetics is not (see Tompkins). In fact, Thrailkill’s analysis is well aware of the importance of sentiment in mid-nineteenth-century fiction (and the critical conversation about sentimentalism), which makes her account of feeling in the postbellum period and beyond all the more powerful and informed. She convincingly demonstrates that the category of aesthetic experience in the later decades of the nineteenth century was being defined and redefined by psychologists, philosophers, scientists, and novelists.

Third, Thrailkill provides an account of the mind-body relation that has profound implications for how we read. By this I mean that the claim about the connectedness of the psychological and the physiological has important consequences the moment we might think of the text as an “object” with a content separate and apart from the emotions represented in or projected onto it. She makes this point quite cogently in her analysis of (and analysis of analyses of) “The Yellow Wallpaper”: “Recasting interpretation as decryption reconfigures...
the experience of the reader as diagnostic rather than aesthetic” (124). Thrailkill’s argument throughout works to perturbate the text, to put it in motion, as it were, to move it past a kind of interpretive “stuckness” that she sees as the theoretical consequence of (psychoanalytic) decryption, which also has produced a focus on “objective” content in order to avoid the perils of “subjectivity.” Here Thrailkill powerfully positions her argument about the temporal movements of realism, beautifully demonstrated in her reading of *The Awakening*, in relation to Jennifer L. Fleissner’s claims about the obstructed temporality in literature of the period (see Fleissner). Thrailkill’s critique of decryption ushers in a fascinating series of interpretations that consistently draws our attention away from “any external referent” (147), as in the case of her reading of *The Red Badge of Courage*, and toward “questions of aesthetic form and its power to elicit bodily response” (159). Thus *The Awakening* becomes a “literary excursion into the venue of rhythm” (191), with the ending not “a mimetic death but a formal ‘stopping point’” (197), and the conclusion of James’s *The Wings of the Dove* proposes an account of memory, of Morton Densher’s memory of Milly, as “not mimetic but passional” (245).

Thrailkill’s book is a deeply satisfying reading experience not only because one is continually surprised by the rigor and creativity of her interpretations, but also because her method embraces and accounts for the particular powers of aesthetic experience. But as original and historically attuned as her readings are, there were moments when I thought the literary archive was too restricted. For example, given that her book situates itself in relation to much work on American realism and naturalism, I was surprised not to see even a reference to Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, or Jack London. In addition, and on a related point, I thought that Holmes sometimes carried too much of an interpretive burden. For example, at the end of her chapter on *A Mortal Antipathy*, Thrailkill writes that Holmes “helped to establish the terror-stricken man, rather than the hysterical woman, as the elided foundational figure for modern trauma theory” (116). It is difficult not to think of Ahab or Dimmesdale or Usher as having helped to pave the way for Holmes’s terrorized man. That said, *Affecting Fictions* gives us a compelling history of the fallacy of the affective fallacy. In embracing what she calls the forensic self—“that productively divided state of being in which one seeks or receives insight into one’s own perceptual experience” (53)—we recognize the obvious fact that when we think, we feel, and when we feel, we think. In doing so, not only do we not lose our scientific footing (the New Critics were not nearly as scientific as they thought when they cordoned the reader from the text), but we become better, more fully informed, more physiologically feeling readers.

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Works Cited
